



Getting ready for your community's assessment?

Suggestions for gathering a team of community members and planning for your own comprehensive local foods initiative.

1. What is a community assessment?

- A way for community members to address their needs using their own resources in a systematic way to identify resources, needs, and specific challenges or problems.
- A process where the community as a whole takes a role in the leadership and implementation of an initiative to achieve a community goal.
- A collection of information and a process that will benefit the community by joining people from all parts of the community into a team to develop an agenda that will result in an action plan resulting in a closer bond.

2. What is the assessment goal?

- To collect information to identify gaps and needs pertaining to the use of local foods; and then identify the resources, services, and systems that could be used to fill the gaps to meet the residents' needs.
- The information gathered will help you understand:
 - ✓ How the community feels about local foods?
 - ✓ What is available to support eating and growing more local foods?
 - ✓ Are there producers to meet the demand for local foods?
 - ✓ Are there untapped markets for local foods?
- The next step will be to present information to community residents and business, civic, and government leaders impressing upon them the need for changes and how they can be accomplished. This information will also be used to form the basis for a well-constructed action plan that reflects your community's goals, resources, and needs.

3. What is a local foods assessment?

An assessment that is focused on determining the ability of your existing community resources to provide

1 - Community assessment guidelines

a source of local foods that is sufficient for the community including all segments of the population from those with no income upward. Local foods should also be fresh and nutritious contributing to the health and well being of the households in the community.

- The end result should provide leaders with a profile of its community, highlighting both negative and positive elements on access to food, hunger, nutrition, and local agriculture data; an inventory of community food resources; and policy perspectives.*

* (H. Joseph, ed. *Community Food Security: A Guide to Concept, Design, and Implementation*, 1997).

4. Components of a local foods assessment can be?

- Are there adequate supermarkets, barriers to food shopping, modes of transportation, selection and price, and local markets for North Dakota grown and produced product? (identifying markets)
- Are there local institutions that could be using more local foods to the benefit of its clients?
- What are the income levels and number of persons in poverty, the use of the emergency food system, and Federal food assistance programs? How can the community fill some of those needs with local foods?
- What are barriers to production like the loss of farmland, farm start-ups, use of sustainable production methods, and availability of locally grown food in local stores? (identifying producers)

5. Why conduct a community assessment?

- Many decisions that affect a community's food systems are made at the local level, such as funding allocations, types of programs or outreach, who to target, and so on.
- Albeit a small step, decisions that increase

emphasis on the importance of local foods coupled with objective, data-based information can become the groundwork for policy or programming decisions. With tight budgets and competing priorities, programs with concise and clear documentation of the needs to which they are responding and the extent to which they are effective in addressing those needs, may be more likely to succeed.

- Local professionals and other community members will have an important role to play in supporting effective policy and programming decisions regarding food system issues in their community. (See Decision-making box)

- Key to community food assessment is the combination of information from a variety of sources where the individual components of local foods would be coordinated into a complete picture of the current situation for local decision-makers.

Decision-making

Examples of decisions by local policymakers that may affect a community's food system:

- ⌚ Should the local school district participate in the new rules about local producer preferences?
- ⌚ Will city officials support zoning or allocating space for community gardens?
- ⌚ Will city officials develop noise and nuisance ordinances that do not unnecessarily discourage local agricultural production?
- ⌚ What are the number of community gardens, home gardens, farmers' markets, community supported agriculture programs; food coops or other alternative food production/distribution arrangements; and open space available for food production?
- ⌚ What are food policies affecting the individual community and evidence of integration of food-related issues into the local planning process?

6. What will the assessment do for us?

- Help you understand more about where your community's food comes from.
- Set goals to improve your community's consumption of locally grown and produced foods
- Provide information for making decisions about policies and actions to promote the business of local foods.
- Establish a long-term monitoring system with a clear set of indicators. This is important in order to compare communities with respect to local foods in the future. (where we began, and what have we accomplished in one year, five years, etc.)

7. Determining your community's information needs

- The purpose of community assessment is to facilitate decision-making about programs and policies that affect food systems in your community, not simply to collect data.
- Before beginning to collect data, it is important to identify key questions, to determine the types of information and analysis needed to answer those questions, and to identify potential users of your findings. You may want to answer the following potential key questions:
 - √ What are the geographic boundaries of the community that you are planning to study?
 - √ Are there households within the community who have limited access to local foods because of income levels or ability to access markets, and who is at highest risk?
 - √ How many people use Federal food assistance programs?
 - √ Does the community have the necessary infrastructure to effectively deliver assistance at the local level?
 - √ Do all people in the community have reasonable access to retail food outlets?
 - √ Are there sufficient resources available to meet the needs of people who need emergency or supplemental food?
 - √ What types of agricultural resources exist in the community?
 - √ Are locally grown foods available in the community's retail food stores or food service outlets?
 - √ Are there local policies and ordinances that affect the community's food security (e.g., policies

regarding the use of municipally owned land for community gardens)?

8. Creating a community food security assessment team

- To help answer these and other questions that may be unique to your community and to plan a local foods assessment, it will be necessary to form team of community members.

- A community assessment is different from other types of assessment inasmuch as it is done by the community and used for that individual community.

- Diverse representation in the planning process is key to a successful outcome. The involvement of individuals from different parts of the community may increase access to data; for example, a representative from the local food pantry may have unique knowledge of and access to data on emergency food use in the community related to community food security issues.

- A diverse team of 8 to 12 people is ideal. The team should consist of professionals and others in the community who have a common interest and who have different areas of expertise. The team also should include community residents who have direct experience with local foods. Here are some examples of people to recruit for your team:

- ✓ Local government representatives

- ✓ Representatives from community-based organizations (religious organizations, emergency food providers, social/neighborhood groups)

- ✓ Health, education, and nutrition providers

- ✓ Food retailers and manufacturers

- ✓ Community residents

- ✓ Farmers

- In addition, it would be helpful to have members who are:

- ✓ People with strong leadership and planning skills

- ✓ Local research resources familiar with data collection and analysis (universities, businesses, or nonprofit organizations that are involved in assessment activities)

- ✓ People with good oral and written communication skills

- Identify key members of each of the desired participating sectors and gain their trust and buy-in initially. These are the people who are most likely to participate willingly and who can involve other groups

of people in the process as well. Although the initiators of the assessment process may be very enthusiastic about the project, others may need to be convinced to participate. When recruiting potential team members, be prepared to describe the following factors:

- ✓ The importance of the assessment

- ✓ How each member can contribute to the process regardless of his or her research skills or knowledge

- ✓ What the planning team will be doing to conduct the assessment and the time commitment involved

- ✓ How the results could be used throughout the community

9. The planning process

- Once an initial assessment team is assembled, the first meeting should be used to outline the initiative and explain possible roles for team members. This first meeting also should be used to determine the need for additional members and a recruitment strategy.

- It is important to keep in mind that although you want to present the overall goal of the assessment, be sure not to have the entire process, or all of the goals and objectives, firmly established before this first planning meeting. Remember that the most successful effort will be achieved by involving all team members in the development of goals and objectives. Your role is to facilitate the team through the assessment process, ensuring that it gains “ownership” of the final product.

- Some factors to think about include the following:

- ✓ Who do you think would make a great team member?

- ✓ Who makes the key policy decisions in your community?

- ✓ How will you communicate your meetings, ideas and assessment to the general community, policy makers and boards?

- ✓ When will you meet, where and how many times?

- ✓ How will gauge your level of success?

(Adapted from USDA Community Food Security Assessment Toolkit. The document can be found in its entirety at www.ers.usda.gov/publications/efan02013/efan02013.pdf)

